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Current Opinion

Is Erasmus Rather than Luther the Prophet of Modern Protestantism?

In an article in the October number of the *Hibbert Journal*, entitled "The Triumph of Erasmus in Modern Protestantism," Professor Henry Goodwin Smith, of Cincinnati, raises this question. "Erasmus," he declares, "was weak in his convictions. His words were often ambiguous. His attitude toward the great dilemmas of the day was evasive. . . . He saw truth on both sides of every actual issue." On the other hand, "Luther towered above him as the rugged champion of honesty and personal liberty." Professor Smith then calls attention to the present acute struggle in Protestantism between the demand for conformity to the past and the demand for spiritual liberty to meet modern problems in a frank fashion. After showing how modern thought is more in accord with Erasmus than with Luther in regard to the chief questions on which the two men took issue—viz., the right of the papacy to a place in Christianity, the proper method of church reform, the toleration of opinion, the significance of dogma, and the freedom of the will—Professor Smith declares that there is a strong tendency today to adopt practically Erasmus' temporizing policy. "It is an ominous fact that the effort to introduce these ideas into organic Protestantism is accompanied by a revival of the indirect and evasive moral methods of Erasmus." "Crypto-liberalism is practiced in communions which will not permit open expression of liberalism. Progressive men are quietly disseminating their views, preaching them cautiously, but usually keeping them out of print. A frank public expression of liberal views is discouraged by the crypto-liberals as "inexpedient," and opposed by conservatives as erroneous. . . . There are many good arguments, or at least a good many arguments, advanced for this position—evolution, continuity, the evils of schism, the unity and peace of the church, love of brethren who differ, and many other excellent reasons. Against all this array, drawn from history, analogy, and the soul of Erasmus, one simple little question stands in the wavering balance: Is it honest?" Professor Smith asserts that the strength of Protestantism depends not so much upon conformity either to past dogma or to modern science as it does upon the spirit of inner sincerity. "Do away with the assertion of your convictions," said Luther, "and you do away with your Christianity." This vigorous article deserves wide reading.

"The Point of Contact" in Religious Thought

Recent numbers of the *Hibbert Journal* have contained an exceedingly interesting discussion between Sir Oliver Lodge, on the one hand, and the bishop of Rochester and other theologians, on the other. Sir Oliver has been endeavoring to restate the doctrine of sin from a scientific point of view, and the bishop of Rochester, with his allies, has been endeavoring to show him his mistakes. It would take too much space to give the arguments in detail, but while criticising the discussion as a whole, in the October number Professor J. H. Muirhead contributes several sentences which occasion thought. After recognizing the great truth that a religion which is to take hold of the mind of man must act along the line of its deepest stream of tendency, Professor Muirhead goes on to say: "This tendency is in the direction of a conception, on the one hand, of God, not as a separate being standing outside the world, but as the principle in which all things find their reality and unity; and, on the other hand, of human nature as wrought in the consciousness of this unity, and destined through the self-revealing power of this principle of progress toward their fuller knowledge and realization of it—all creation groaning and travailing for the revelation of the sons of God. In the furtherance of this progress the church is called to a great task—no other than the interpretation to man of his highest aspirations and proper destiny, the insistence upon the complete self-surrender to the highest within him for which Christianity stands as the condition of their realization, and the organization of social and civil life so as to give completest expression to them in the outer order. That it may continue to perform this task in the future, as it has done in the past, the chief condition is a clear understanding of the direction these aspirations are at present taking, the view of its own destiny that science and philosophy are forcing upon mankind. Articles like that of Sir Oliver Lodge, springing, as the bishop acknowledges, from a spirit *naturaliter Christiana*, are a warning to the present-day exponents of the Christian tradition that they are in danger of forgetting the primary requirement of our time and, in so far as they do so, are themselves responsible for the division between science and religion, which they deplore."

It is to be hoped that all religious teachers will come to recognize the truth of these statements. The average man of business may not care for fine-spun philosophy, but he is affected, either consciously or unconsciously, by the great movements in the world of thought. And even if today's man of affairs is an exception to his statement, his children who are coming up in school and in college are in danger of being trained away from that world-view which much of our preaching presupposes. The

practical question is a very simple one: Shall we attempt to build up in a modern man that apperception which makes the thought of some past biblical era effective, or shall we so present biblical truth as to make it effective among men who are possessed of today's stock of truth and today's intellectual tendencies? The greatest problem of today is not the discovery of new truths, but the discovery of points of contact and methods of application for the truth we already possess. Christianity must succeed in this regard if it is to compel the assent of the modern man and woman.

Shall we Study Sociology in the Sunday School?

John C. Adams and Urbain J. Leverrier, by mathematical calculations based on the motions of the already discovered Uranus, declared that an unknown planet ought to be found in a certain position among the stars. Galle, of Berlin, in 1846, turned his telescope to the place and actually saw the stranger. Something analogous is at hand in regard to religious education. The study of psychology has revealed perturbations in the individual consciousness due to nightly social attractions. The contents of the Old Testament and the spirit of the New Testament force thoughtful men to value the historical setting of a truth. The genius of our religion is manifested in the life of him who came to minister and who did serve mankind. He laid down the law that "he that is willing to do shall know," and that "the tree is known by its fruits." Recent writers on religious education have insisted on the study of social facts, relations, ideals, and methods in order to discover the actual situation in which the soul is to work out its salvation, and in which faith is to demonstrate its vitality and usefulness. G. S. Hall, W. T. Harris, Haslett, Coe, Starbuck, Paul Natorp, and Pease, may be cited as illustrations of the tendency. Character is formed by habitually doing what we ought to do. We cannot do what we do not know. Duty is determined by the total of contemporary facts of human relations. Ancient texts reveal the essential spirit of religion, and the life of Jesus is its highest manifestation; but manna from heaven must be freshly gathered. Social ethics, on the basis of social science and philosophy, is the new planet which is just swimming into the field of distinct vision. Psychology, theological ethics, and biblical ideas require us to lay upon sociologists, and upon specialists in particular fields of social science, the task of discovering what individuals, churches, families, and administrations ought to do in order to "make reason and the will of God prevail." Most works on ethics are too vague. Some of the best of them were written when the police function of government was all that was

acknowledged to be legitimate, and when the community and corporations were thought to have neither souls nor obligations. All the new books on the Sunday school give a place for sociology in classes for adolescents and adults. But where are the textbooks for use in such classes? Perhaps a beginning has been made; but there is room for improvement. Meantime it is a gain that the spiritual value of direct study of contemporary life has been ungrudgingly acknowledged by biblical scholars. Will the sociologists respond to the demand? Will they help to teach that "God is in the world his power first made"? There are signs that they are moving in the direction required by the practical requirements of the good life.